

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 21, 2010

CONTACT:

Louis G. Pukelis (312) 814-0778

Carbon monoxide dangers are greatest during winter home heating season

*Invisible and odorless gas may seep into home due to
inadequate maintenance of furnace and air ducts*

CHICAGO – For most people, home furnaces have sat idle during the summer. As temperatures go down, it's important to understand the possible dangers that lurk when restarting a dormant furnace, warns the Office of the Illinois State Fire Marshal (OSFM).

"The greatest danger comes from carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning," said State Fire Marshal Larry Matkaitis. "Known as the 'silent killer,' CO is an invisible and odorless byproduct caused from the incomplete burning of fuels, such as gasoline, wood, coal, natural gas, propane, oil and methane."

Carbon monoxide and fire

In a typical home heating system, CO comes from the burning of natural gas. If the system is operating correctly, the dangerous CO escapes through the chimney. However, problems arise if the system hasn't been cleaned or inspected by a licensed heating-cooling professional. Over time, blockages or breaches in the duct work may prevent the noxious CO from escaping the home or apartment. An invisible and deadly gas cloud may backup into the living spaces.

Like oxygen, CO enters the human body through breathing. CO poisoning can be confused with flu symptoms, food poisoning and other illnesses. Some symptoms include shortness of breath, nausea, dizziness, light headedness or headaches. Everyone is at risk for CO poisoning, but infants, pregnant women and people with physical conditions that limit their ability to use oxygen, such as emphysema, asthma or heart disease, can be more severely affected by low concentrations of CO than healthy adults. High levels of CO can be fatal for anyone, causing death within minutes.

CO dangers also exist when some families, who may be struggling to pay their heating bills, will turn on the kitchen stove burners and the oven in an effort to take the chill off of their home. What these families don't realize is how dangerous this practice can be. A gas oven or range top should never be used for heating because poisonous CO fumes could fill the home or the open flames could start a fire.

According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) there is an increased risk of dying in a home fire during December, January and February, which are generally the deadliest months for fire.

OSFM offers some simple steps can prevent CO or heating-related fires from happening in your home:

- Keep anything that can burn at least three feet away from heating equipment, like the furnace, fireplace, wood stove, or portable space heater.
- Have a three-foot “kid-free zone” around open fires and space heaters.
- Never use your oven to heat your home.
- Have a qualified professional install stationary space heating equipment, water heaters or central heating equipment according to the local codes and manufacturer’s instructions.
- Have heating equipment and chimneys cleaned and inspected every year by a qualified professional.
- Remember to turn portable heaters off when leaving the room or going to bed.
- Always use the right kind of fuel, specified by the manufacturer, for fuel burning space heaters.
- Make sure the fireplace has a sturdy screen to stop sparks from flying into the room. Ashes should be cool before putting them in a metal container. Keep the container a safe distance away from your home.
- Install smoke alarms and test monthly.
- CO alarms are not substitutes for smoke alarms. Know the difference between the sound of smoke alarms and CO alarms.
- Test CO alarms at least once a month.
- If your CO alarm sounds, immediately move to a fresh air location outdoors or by an open window and doors and call for help. Remain at the fresh air location until emergency personnel say it is okay.
- If the audible trouble signal sounds, check for low batteries or other trouble indicators.

For more information, please visit www.state.il.us/osfm or www.nfpa.org.

###